

**In the Claims:**

**Please amend the claims as follows:**

1. (Currently Amended) A system for accessing a surgical target site on a lateral aspect of a vertebral column of a patient, comprising:

an initial distraction assembly for creating an initial distraction corridor to said surgical target site, ~~said initial dilator assembly including at least two dilator members disposed within a dilating cannula~~; and

a retractor assembly having a plurality of retractor blades dimensioned to be introduced ~~sequentially~~ to said surgical target site after said ~~at least two dilator members of said initial distraction dilator assembly has been used have been actuated~~ to establish said initial distraction corridor and thereafter secondarily distracted to create and maintain an operative corridor to said surgical target site, wherein said retractor blades are dimensioned to extend in a generally lateral direction from an incision on the skin of said patient to said surgical target site to access said surgical target site via a lateral, trans-psoas surgical approach.

2. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1, wherein said initial distraction assembly includes a dilating cannula, at least two dilator members disposed within a dilating cannula, and a K-wire, ~~[[and]]~~ wherein said at least two dilator members and said dilating cannula are capable of being slideably passed over [[a]] said K-wire to perform said initial distraction.

3. (Original) The system of claim 1, wherein said plurality of retractor blades are secondarily distracted through the use of a sequential dilation assembly.

4. (Original) The system of claim 3, wherein said sequential dilation assembly is introduced between at least two retractor blades to perform said secondary distraction.

5. (Original) The system of claim 1, wherein said retractor assembly includes at least one shim member to be coupled to at least one of said retractor blades, said shim member including an extension dimensioned to extend past said retractor blade into the surgical target site.

6. (Currently Amended) The system of claim [[5]] 1, wherein at least one of said initial distraction assembly and system, one of said retractor blades ~~, and said at least one shim member~~ includes at least one stimulation electrode.

7. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 6, further comprising a control unit capable of electrically stimulating said at least one stimulation electrode, sensing a response of a nerve depolarized by said stimulation, determining at least one of nerve proximity and nerve [[a]] direction from at least one of said initial distraction system [[,]] and one of said retractor blades ~~, and said at least one shim member~~ to the nerve based upon the sensed response, and communicating said direction to a user.

8. (Original) The system of claim 7, further comprising an electrode configured to sense a neuromuscular response of a muscle coupled to said depolarized nerve, the electrode being operable to send the response to the control unit.

9. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 2, wherein said K-wire has a first stimulation electrode at a distal tip of [[the]] said K-wire.

10. (Cancelled)

11. (Cancelled)

12. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 7, further comprising a handle coupled to at least one of said initial distraction assembly[[,]] and one of said retractor blades ~~, and said at least one shim member~~, the handle having at least one button for initiating the electrical stimulation from said control unit to said at least one stimulation electrode.

13. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 7, wherein the control unit comprises a display operable to display an electromyographic (EMG) response of a a [[the]] muscle coupled to said nerve depolarized by said stimulation.

14. (Original) The system of claim 7, wherein the control unit comprises a touch-screen display operable to receive commands from a user.

15. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 7, wherein said at least one [[the]] stimulation electrode[[s]] is [[are]] positioned near a distal end of at least one of the initial distraction assembly system, and one of said retractor blades, ~~and said at least one shim member.~~

16. (Original) A method of accessing a surgical target site, comprising the steps of:  
     creating an initial distraction corridor to the surgical target site;  
     sequentially introducing a plurality of retractor blades into said initial distraction corridor;  
     distracting said plurality of retractor blades to create a secondary distraction corridor;  
     and  
     securing said plurality of retractor blades to create and maintain an operative corridor to said surgical target site.

17. (Original) The method of claim 16, wherein said step of creating an initial distraction corridor is accomplished by using a K-wire and at least one dilator capable of being slideably passed over said K-wire.

18. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 16, wherein said step of distracting ~~from said initial~~ to create said secondary distraction corridor is accomplished by using ~~includes performing~~ a secondary distraction system.

19. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 17, wherein said step of distracting to create said secondary distraction corridor ~~performing secondary distraction system~~ is accomplished by using a sequential dilation system in between at least two of said retractor blades to move said at least two retractor blades apart from one another.

20. (Currently) The method of claim 16, further comprising the step of providing an initial distraction assembly for creating said initial distraction corridor ~~a control unit capable of electrically stimulating said at least one stimulation electrode, sensing a response of a nerve~~

~~depolarized by said stimulation, determining a direction from a surgical accessory to the nerve based upon the sensed response, and communicating said direction to a user.~~

21. (New) The method of claim 20, further comprising a control unit capable of electrically stimulating at least one stimulation electrode positioned near a distal end of at least one of said initial distraction assembly and one of said plurality of retractor blades, sensing a response of a nerve depolarized by said stimulation, determining at least one of nerve proximity and nerve direction from at least one of said initial distraction assembly and at least one of said plurality of retractor blades to the nerve based upon the sensed response, and communicating said direction to a user.

22. (New) The method of claim 20, wherein said initial distraction assembly includes a dilating cannula, at least two dilator members disposed within a dilating cannula, and a K-wire, wherein said at least two dilator members and said dilating cannula are capable of being slideably passed over said K-wire.

23. (New) The method of claim 16, further comprising the step of coupling at least one shim member to at least one of said retractor blades, said shim member including an extension dimensioned to extend past said retractor blade into the surgical target site.

24. (New) The method of claim 16, further comprising the step of providing at least one stimulation electrode on at least one of said retractor blades.

25. (New) The method of claim 20, further comprising the step of providing at least one stimulation electrode on at least one of said retractor blades and said initial distraction assembly.

26. (New) The method of claim 7, further comprising an electrode configured to sense a neuromuscular response of a muscle coupled to said depolarized nerve, the electrode being operable to send the response to the control unit.

27. (New) The method of claim 16, wherein said operative corridor is established via a lateral, trans-psoas approach to said spinal target site.

28. (New) The method of claim 21, wherein the control unit comprises a display operable to display an electromyographic (EMG) response of a muscle coupled to said nerve depolarized by said stimulation.

29. (New) The method of claim 21, wherein the control unit comprises a touch-screen display operable to receive commands from a user.

30. (New) The method of claim 21, wherein said at least one stimulation electrode is positioned near a distal end of at least one of the initial distraction assembly and one of said retractor blades.